Military Decisionmaking in the First Russian Peacekeeping Separate Airborne Brigade

Major Donald R. Baker, U.S. Army
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

"I JUST WISH they would use some type of staff planning process; it would make everything so much easier," I voiced this frustration many times to my fellow U.S. liaison officers (LNOs) during my 4-month internship with the First Peacekeeping Russian Separate Airborne Brigade (1st PRSAB) in Bosnia-Herzegovina. While working with the 1st PRSAB, I learned much about how the Russians conduct their decisionmaking process, which is much different from what U.S. soldiers recognize.

One must not be too quick to assume that the Russians conduct decisionmaking in the manner I describe in all aspects of their military operations. Such a conclusion would be misguided; however, my observations might help other military personnel who work with Russian units in future missions or operations.

The Art and Science of Decisionmaking

U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations*, states, "Decisions are the means by which the commander translates his vision of the end-state into action."[1] The U.S. military is also taught that decisionmaking is both an art and a science. Its quantifiable aspects, such as movement rates, fuel consumption, and weapons effects, are part of the science of war. On the other hand, the effects of leadership (important in a Russian organization), complexity of operations and uncertainty regarding enemy intentions belong to the art of war. The U.S. military is a well-blended mix of the science and the art of decisionmaking. The Russians lean more toward the art side of decisionmaking.

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When I was a corps aviation unit brigade intelligence officer (S2), I wondered why we needed to study the personal profiles of enemy commanders. The task seemed useless at the battalion level and below because commanders at these levels seemed to have little room to maneuver within the constraints of their superiors' orders. Through my experience, I now know this is not the case. The Russian commander's personality determines how his unit con-

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ducts operations. Russian commanders did not make a single decision without the brigade commander's (COMBRIG's) approval and direct involvement. If the COMBRIG was strong and experienced, he made decisions, and missions were quickly accomplished. Conversely, if the commander was weak or had little or no experience, decisions were often delayed, if made at all, which was frustrating, considering how rapidly U.S. Army's technology demands that information be passed from the soldier on the ground to commanders and planning staffs.

Full Versus Shortened MDMP

The full military decisionmaking process (MDMP) is a deliberate, detailed, time-consuming process that helps a commander make well-informed decisions and choose the appropriate course of action (COA). A commander uses the full process when adequate time and staff resources are available to thoroughly examine the numerous friendly and enemy COAs. In time-constrained environments, the MDMP might be shortened to issue guidance and orders in a timelier manner so subordinate units will have adequate time to plan and rehearse the mission. The shortened version of the MDMP is still based on the full MDMP, but it is tailored to fit within time restrictions. Herein lies a major observation. The Russians seem to always use a shortened, informal MDMP. Doing so is generally not caused by external factors that force them to take quick action; for example, having received intelligence reports indicating that a large crowd is rioting outside the homes of returning displaced persons. In most cases, it is an *intentional* decision to wait until the last minute to make decisions. Clearly, the delay to make a decision is not because of an *inability* to make a decision; again, it appears to stem from a conscious effort to wait to gather as much information as possible before making that decision.

During one mission, the unit had received a warning order from the division through the LNOs no less than 4 days before mission execution. The information was translated and presented to the brigade almost immediately. As with most orders that a brigade staff receives from a division, there are many "due-outs" and much information "to be published." To fill in some of these gaps, U.S. units send requests for information (RFIs) to higher headquarters.

In my experience, after a day or two the other LNOs and I were becoming anxious because the brigade staff seemed to be doing little in the way of planning for the joint mission. After asking the Russian assistant S3 and other officers many times about the status of the planning and getting no information, I asked the Russian S3 in a frank but respectful way about the status of the planning. Initially, he asked if we had any additional information to provide (answer the due-outs). When I told him that we had submitted the RFIs to the division and were awaiting responses, he answered, "Well, we cannot do any of our planning until we have all of the information." In my best Russian, I tried to explain to him the concept of parallel planning. After approximately 10 painstaking minutes, the Russian S3 responded, "Don, we have a much different system than you. We wait until we have all of the information and then are able to make a decision. There is no reason to plan at this point when we don't have all of the information that we need."

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Obviously, I do not want to portray the Russians as being incapable of making quick decisions; on the contrary, when it is time to execute actions, they execute. Russian history is proof of their ability to survive.

MDMP Offers Flexibility

Advantages of using a full MDMP include the ability to analyze multiple COAs (both enemy and friendly); to maximize the integration of forces as well as coordination and synchronization; and to produce a detailed operations plan or order. The glaring disadvantage is that the complete MDMP is time consuming. Still, the complete MDMP offers flexibility in that most COAs have been reviewed and studied, and subordinate units are prepared to conduct operations against myriad possibilities.

Any good commander, regardless of nationality or military education, has the flexibility to quickly make decisions and ensure subordinate units immediately execute his directives. This is why personality plays a large role in Russian military units. What is lost in time; that is, time to conduct a thorough MDMP, *might* be compensated for in the form of a strong leader with good decisionmaking skills. In contrast a good staff can compensate for a less-than-perfect commander's decisionmaking abilities—the genius versus the "collective" genius. Admittedly, this

Soldiers of the 1st Peacekeeping Russian Separate Airborne Brigade near the Bosnian town of Bijeljina, 11 June 2002.

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Russia's planning process is not much different from the U.S. planning process where a weaker staff supports a strong commander. The difference seems to be that the Russian system is* designed *for a highly capable commander and a weaker staff. . . . [And] despite the fact that the Russian military cannot produce orders electronically, they can still disseminate information that completely conveys the mission's intent.

degree of compensation might be small. When a military unit habitually uses a formal planning process, the staff's ability to provide the commander with good, solid information versus no information at all might be the difference between mission success and mission failure.

Commander's Role

As stated in FM 101-5, the commander is in charge of the MDMP and decides which procedures to use in every situation.[2] The planning process depends on a "clear articulation of a battlefield visualization."[3] Russia's planning process is not much different from the U.S. planning process where a weaker staff supports a strong commander. The difference seems to be that the Russian system is *designed* for a highly capable commander and a weaker staff. The commander's role becomes essential in mission development.

What then might occur in a unit led by a less-than-capable commander? Could one expect a difference on the battlefield between a Russian unit and a U.S. unit under the same circumstances? In U.S. units, officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are taught decisionmaking skills at both the individual and unit levels. The phrase "when in charge, take charge" resonates throughout the U.S. military. This concept is often lacking in other militaries, especially the Russian military. A commander can make or break a unit; a unit's failure is amplified when it relies too heavily on a commander's influence, especially if that unit is not good enough to fill the "holes" of a less-than-capable commander.

Seven Steps of the MDMP

The seven steps of the U.S. Army's MDMP are —

1. Receipt of the mission.
2. Mission analysis.
3. COA development.
4. COA analysis.
5. COA comparison.
6. COA approval.
7. Orders production.

The first step in the Russian MDMP is no different than it is with any other multinational unit that conducted operations as part of the Operation Joint Forge. The only exception is that all orders come through the LNOs for translation before they are presented to the operations officer or his representative. Normally, this process does not take much time. In addition to U.S. LNOs working at 1st PRSAB headquarters, six cadets from the Russian Military Academy provide translation. However, their

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Members of the Russian military contingent brief U.S. Army LTG William Ward, Commander of the Stabilization Force.

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goal is more one of linguistic training than of actual mission participation.

Probably the greatest problem during the entire MDMP occurs at this point—the dissemination of information. In the U.S. military, the common question is, "Who else needs to know?" U.S. officers and NCOs see this question posted in tactical operation centers, administrative and logistical operation centers, and even in garrison operation shops. To ensure the production of a sound order, no one is to hold information; it is to be disseminated so all staff sections can accomplish their respective planning tasks. An operations section accomplishes this by sending a warning order to alert the staff of the upcoming planning process.

Disseminating information to all staff sections is not common practice with the Russians, where one or two people decide who needs to know. Personnel who receive the information, usually the S3 or the chief of staff (the same function as the U.S. military executive officer) will either hold the information until time for action or will wait until they are able to present all of the information to the commander. Only on a few occasions are individual staff elements allowed access to the information before it is time to execute the mission.

Because of the Russians' self-imposed shortened planning period, many combined operations and training events never realize their full operational or training potential, which creates many otherwise avoidable problems for the higher headquarters unit, other multinational units, other Russian units, and especially, U.S. LNOs.

To maximize all combined operation and training opportunities, LNOs quickly learn to take the information they receive in an order, determine what goes to which staff element, and *personally* deliver it. The LNO then ensures all staff sections are aware of the actions. The information an LNO provides from his assigned unit to the one in which he is working is extended so he becomes a conduit of information within the unit itself.

As soon as staff members become aware of the pending mission, they immediately prepare for the

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next step of the MDMP—mission analysis. The staff normally prepares for mission analysis by gathering all necessary tools and information, including—

- The higher headquarters' order or plan, with graphics.
- Maps of the area of operation.
- Unit and higher headquarters' standard operating procedures (SOPs).
- Appropriate field manuals.
- Any existing staff estimates.

Once the staff receives the mission, it does a quick assessment to decide the initial allocation of time. The commander and staff then balance the desire for detailed planning against the need for immediate response. As a general rule, the U.S. military commander allots two-thirds of the available time to subordinate units for planning and preparation while he and his staff use the other one-third for the planning process.

Different Planning Paths

This is the point in the decisionmaking process where the Russian Army and the U.S. Army take different paths. The Russian unit might or might not inform the commander of the impending operation. The 1st PRSAB staff normally waited to receive all of the information before proceeding with the MDMP. To be more precise, the staff waited until it had received all of the information it felt it needed to make a proper decision or until it *had* to make a decision and initiate an operation.

The next four steps of the MDMP were condensed into one briefing or conversation between the operations officer or between pertinent staff members and the 1st PRSAB COMBRIG. Just as these four steps are the most time-consuming portion of the MDMP in the U.S. military, they also consume the most time in the Russian military. Staff members, relying on personal experiences or experiences of members of their staffs, brief the commander on the operation in an informal setting. It is rarely a formal process when the chief of staff in a Russian unit assembles all staff members and uses such tools as a synchronization matrix or wargaming worksheets. Depending on the situation, the COMBRIG might or might not issue guidance to staff members on the spot.

The individual commander's personality is crucial to the process. If the commander clearly understands the concept of the operation; if he can visualize all possible COAs (friendly and enemy); and if he can issue clear, concise guidance, he can provide the critical component of a successful operation. This does not predict the mission's success or failure, but if done correctly, the staff can produce an order that communicates the commander's intent to subordinate units. Once the commander has made his decision, the orders-production phase begins. In the U.S. Army, the operations section works with other staff members to produce an order transforming the commander's guidance into a product ready for execution.

Despite the fact that the Russian military cannot produce orders electronically, they can still disseminate information that completely conveys the mission's intent. During a discussion with a seasoned NCO, I stated that U.S. Army leadership is excellent at taking the initiative in crisis situations. In a Russian unit that does not have a strong commander, this might not be the case. The NCO felt that Russian units might be more flexible and better able to react quickly to mission changes than units that use the more formal MDMP.

The world is a different place now than when we stared at the Russians on the other side of the Fulda Gap through our gunsights, expecting the "Great Red Horde" to come through at any moment. In those days, we were not sure why we studied the enemy's leadership traits. Today, we are working with the Russians, and know the Russian unit commander's personality plays an extremely important role in the way a unit functions. If the leader is strong, experienced, and able to make decisions, the unit performs well. If the commander is weak, inexperienced, and unable to make timely, accurate decisions, the unit bogs down with inaction. This is a lesson worth learning. Today, the best MDMP ensures the development of leaders who, despite the formal MDMP, can take charge anywhere on the battlefield and successfully face any unforeseen challenge. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Department of the Army, Field Manual 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 31 May 1997), 5-1.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.